

The Study of the American Founding at the College of William & Mary

Preamble

William & Mary is a “public Ivy,” one of the world's great liberal arts universities. We are an engaged community making a difference for the better – our students come wanting to change the world and leave with the tools and perspective to do it. We prepare students to make a difference, to be leaders, to have an impact regardless of their field. Drawing on the powerful link between the liberal arts and self-governance in a free society, W&M produces good citizens and effective leaders. Our students learn to think critically, to understand the vital lessons of the past, to be open to new ideas and different perspectives, and to care about the public good.

Producing good citizens and effective leaders has been a W&M strength for generations. Our graduates hold leading positions today, and no other university can claim a greater impact on our early history. W&M graduates and others linked to the College played a pivotal role in the founding of the United States and crafting its fundamental governance documents. The decisions made by the founders and the structures and processes they created continue to shape civil discourse today as to how to best balance liberty, equality and order in a free society. An understanding of their story, in the context of their time and ours, provides an important reference for the continuing debate of the perennial issues with which they struggled.

W&M is ideally situated to be a leader in the study of America’s founders and the continued relevance of their core principles. The beautiful historic sections of the campus are largely unchanged from the days when many of the founders were here. The College sits in the middle of America’s Historic Triangle where the legacies of representative government and free enterprise took root. America’s English colonial history began in Jamestown, her principles of education and representative democracy were tested and refined in Williamsburg, and her independence was secured at Yorktown. Colonial Williamsburg, adjacent to the campus, has unique infrastructure and programs that complement W&M’s strengths. Together, the two organizations have unique legitimacy and resources in this area. Both organizations have significant convening authority, particularly on the topic of the founding.

W&M has academic strengths in law, history, government, public policy, education and other disciplines that are important in understanding various aspects of the founding. Centers and programs with particular relevance include the Institute of Bill of Rights Law, the American Studies Program, the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, and the National Institute of American History and Democracy. The latter two programs are partnerships with the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation: they provide excellent platforms for further collaboration in studies of the founding.

Mission

The mission of the program for the Study of the American Founding at William & Mary is to encourage and support, within a broad historical perspective, a thorough understanding of the ideas, institutions and guiding principles of the founders, with a particular emphasis on their continued relevance to the pressing issues and debates of today. The program will continue to explore formats best suited to promoting that understanding, including potential new courses, curricula, faculty, conferences, materials for television or the internet, lectures, and expansion of collaborations between William & Mary and Colonial Williamsburg.